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*Blind Workers Against Charity: The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893 – 1970.* Matthias Reiss. 2015. Palgrave Macmillan.

Reviewer – Simon Hayhoe

The placard on the front cover of *Blind Workers Against Charity: The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893 – 1970*, sums up the organisation featured in this book succinctly: “Justice not Charity.” In its earliest years, Blind Workers Against Charity (BWAC) was a rather haphazard organisation, founded in the last decade of the nineteenth century - it is not wholly clear what year the organisation started, as Reiss notes, as it began as an organic single-issue campaign. After considering his evidence, Reiss ascribes BWAC’s substantial foundation to a group of workers from charitably run workshops and former students from schools for the blind in 1893. In workshops, blind workers were often given limited rights, worked long hours, and were expected only to undertake menial repetitive tasks, such as cane weaving. BWAC fought against injustices suffered by such labourers, and based on this single philosophy the organisation grew healthily in its earliest decade. The organisation also became a trades union in 1898, although it took until 1902 before it was affiliated by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and became recognised by mainstream unions. In the early decades of the twentieth century, BWAC strengthened and developed a significantly larger membership. This membership projected more general social issues related to blindness, and BWAC also began to campaign for the rights of people with other disabilities too. Most importantly, in the twentieth century BWAC fought to have the rights of people who were blind recognised by the government, whose support they hoped would diminish the need for charity. However, as BWAC developed and despite its core philosophy, its campaigning narrative became cloudier and, as with too many similar labour movements, egos began to surface. Ultimately, infighting between the organisation’s founders and leaders arose. Influential members then split from BWAC to join or form other parallel campaigning organisations. Even worse, later in the twentieth century and through a further legal twist of fate, BWAC went through the ignominy of becoming a charity itself. This was a fatal contradiction of what it had been formed to fight against.

In his highly-detailed book, *Blind Workers Against Charity: The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893 – 1970*, Reiss explores the evolution of BWAC. The

book moves from its beginnings to its present-day arrangement as a campaigning organisation, which has done much for disability and workers' rights. The book itself is set-out in six chapters, which discuss three main aspects of BWAC: its message and core philosophies, the organisation as a political and protest movement, and its role as a trade union for people employed in workshops for the blind and similar charitable organisations. In addition to its main chapters, Reiss provides case studies of two of BWAC's highly influential officers: Ben Purse, perhaps the most controversial of the original founders – of whom Reiss reflects that the, “problematic twofold nature of leadership is amply illustrated by the case of Benjamin (‘Ben’) Purse.” (p. 42) – and Tom Parker, a later and less controversial executive member with a no less prolific career. Reiss also includes a case study of two important periodicals published by BWAC: *The Blind Advocate* – a traditional print journal – and *Horizon* – which was only available in Braille. Both journals were launched by Ben Purse at the end of the nineteenth century, were both campaigning and both kept members informed on the progress of existing campaigns.

There are many good points about this book. Reiss' scholarship in choosing such an important and influential organisation as well as his conduct in researching it are sound. Even more importantly, the textual sources are rich, and the depth of his data is perhaps the real highlight of its text - documents have been gathered and cited from trades union and labour movement archives, as well as from BWAC's records and original copies of its two journals. For the reader, there are numerous anecdotes and interesting sketches of the featured characters and events that formed the movement. I found the description of the march to London by BWAC's members in the early 1920s particularly enjoyable. There are also citations from books and articles external to BWAC by officers involved with the organisation, such as those by Ben Purse and Tom Parker themselves. I was particularly impressed to see how Martin Milligan, former professor of philosophy at Leeds University and co-author of *Sight Unseen* (Magee & Milligan, 1995), had links to the organisation during his early career. These copious notes are almost a resource in themselves. However, there are also important weaknesses and omissions in *Blind Workers Against Charity, The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893 – 1970*. In his introduction, for instance, Reiss repeats Mills' claim that in the last two decades writing on the history or social condition of blindness has become “trendy” (p. 12). In matter of fact, the best-known books on blindness have been published in an almost constant stream from the seventeenth century to the end of the twentieth century (Hayhoe, 2015). For example, in the

references of at least one of the books he cites Reiss could have found a well-known history of workshops and schools for the blind from the early twentieth century by Illingworth (1910). In addition, perhaps the most well-known histories of blindness in France were written in the 1980s (Paulson, 1987) and the early 1990s (Jay, 1994). Modern philosophies and histories of blindness are also inspired by writing during the enlightenment, particularly by Diderot's (2001) *Letter on the Blind for Those Who See*, and Locke's (2001) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Furthermore, Reiss also states, "The perception of blind people as deserving recipients of charity has been firmly established since Tudor times..." (p. 163). However, it is well established in the contemporary literature on blindness that people who are blind have been the focus of charity since antiquity. In Britain, the earliest workshops were first created for blinded soldiers returning from the crusades (Barasch, 2001). Perhaps importantly for a book on the history of blindness and the labour movement, there is little mention of the class or gender divide within the blind community – almost all the officers discussed in the book were men, although most workshops had strong gender divisions. Importantly, the book also contains no international context, and concentrates almost solely on BWAC rather than the context of the time or the international movements of disabled people. For example, although the British splinter group National Federation of the Blind (NFB) is mentioned, how this influenced and was influenced by the United States' NFB is not. Although these points may seem details, it may have been better for Reiss to understand how his work fit into a broader cultural history of blindness before developing his study. Moreover, this weakened Reiss' claim at the beginning of the book that this study was an addition to the history of disability. I also found the structure of the book somewhat confusing, although this was more a need for a judicious editor than a lack of scholarship. For example, in his discussion Reiss went beyond the year 1970 stated in the title, bringing his history up to the modern era. It was also not wholly clear why 1970 was such a life-changing landmark for BWAC. The conclusions in chapters were also not traditional conclusions that summarised the prose before them. Many of these conclusions continued discussions and introduced new evidence and citations, again leaving me slightly confused about their role. This said, *Blind Workers Against Charity: The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893 – 1970*, is a strong and interesting book. It should be read as an understanding of political ideologies, philosophies, fallibilities, egos and compromises. It is also a strong comment on an organisation trying to be both a union and a pioneering, campaigning movement, but

becoming that which it fought against. Most importantly, *Blind Workers Against Charity: The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893 – 1970*, is a needed survey of an important group of inexperienced yet determined people who have helped shape the landscape of their minority group. It is also a rare sketch of people who had been exploited for too long, and charts a historically important struggle against exclusion.

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